

Documents on Diplomacy: The Source

The Execution of Louis XVI

Gouverneur Morris to Thomas Jefferson, September 10, 1792

Sir,
The late King of this Country has been publicly executed. He died in a manner becoming his dignity. Mounting the scaffold he expressed anew his forgiveness of those who persecuted him and prayed that his deluded people might benefit by his Death. On the scaffold he attempted to speak but the commanding officer, Santeur, ordered the drums to be beat. The King made two unavailing efforts but with the same bad success. The Executioners threw him down and were in such haste as to let fall the axe before his neck was properly placed so that he was mangled. It would be needless to give you an affecting narrative of particulars. I proceed to what is more important having but a few minutes to write by the present good opportunity.

The greatest care was taken to prevent an affluence of people. This proves a conviction that the majority was not favorable to that severe measure. In effect the greatest of the Parisian citizens mourned the fate of their unhappy Prince. I have seen grief such as for the untimely death of a beloved parent. Everything wears an appearance of solemnity which is awfully distressing. . . .

If my judgement be good, the testament of Louis the Sixteen will be more powerful against the present rulers of this country than an army of an hundred thousand men. You will learn the effect it has in England. I believe that the English will be wound up to a pitch of enthusiastic horror against France which their cool and steady temper seems to be scarcely susceptible of.

. . . I consider a war between Britain and France as inevitable. The Continental powers opposed to France are making great and

prompt efforts, while on this side I as yet see but little done to oppose them. There is a treaty on foot (I believe) between England and Austria whose object is the dismemberment of France. I have not proof but some very leading circumstances. Britain will I think suspend the blow till she can strike very hard, unless indeed they should think it advisable to seize the moment of indignation against late events for a Declaration of War.

With sincere esteem I am
my dear sir
your obedient servant,

GOUV. MORRIS ■

Paris, October 18th, 1793

My Dear Sir;
...The present Government is evidently a despotism both in principle and practice. The Convention now consists of only a part of those who were chosen to frame a constitution. These, after putting under arrest their fellows, claim all power, and have delegated the greater part of it to a *Committee of Safety*. . . . It is an emphatical phrase in fashion among the patriots that *terror is the order of the day*. Some years have elapsed since Montesquieu wrote that the principle of arbitrary governments is fear.

The Queen was executed the day before yesterday. Insulted during her trial and reviled in her last moments she behaved with dignity through-out. This execution will, I think, give to future hostilities a deeper dye and unite more intimately the allied Powers.

But whatever may be the lot of France in remote futurity, and putting aside the military events, it seems evident that she must soon be governed by a single despot. Whether she will pass to that point through the medium of a triumvirate or other small body of men seems as yet undetermined. I think it most probable that she will. A great and awful crisis seems to be near at hand. . .

I am &c.

GOUVERNEUR MORRIS ■

Source

"Emperor Dead" and other Historic American Dispatches, Edited by
Peter D. Eicher, pp. 47-48; Washington, D.C.: 1997